

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the writer intends to describe the topic discussed in the study briefly. The writer also explains the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, significance of the study, and scope limitation of the study in this chapter.

1.1 Background of the Study

In societal systems, the struggle for female freedom and the pervasive inequality of the sexes are deeply intertwined, reflecting broader societal power dynamics and systemic oppression. Inequality of the sexes, or gender inequality, refers to the differences in treatment, opportunity, and social position between individuals of various genders, with a significant focus on the disparities between men and women. These discrepancies manifest in various forms across different aspects of life, including economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions. Economically, women often face wage gaps, limited access to higher-paying jobs, and barriers to career advancement (Firdausy, 2021:1). According to Suryani (2022:27) female sexuality is traditionally characterized as naturally masochistic, narcissistic, and passive, aligning with perceptions of women as submissive and self-sacrificing. This perspective reduces women's sexual identities to their reproductive functions, suggesting that their primary sexual role is tied to motherhood. In contrast, male sexuality is inscribed as naturally aggressive, sadistic, and active, portraying men as dominant and assertive pursuers of sexual gratification.

In a male dominated society, women are considered as Others, projected images of male demands, and inferior to male expectations rather than being seen for who they indeed are. When the inclusive phrase "women" is used to discuss gender injustice, we run into a dangerous minefield because much of the power of the binary distinction between men and women is fragmented. Any oversimplified notion that sexes 'inequality' is just a matter of all men having greater control and privilege than all women is disturbed by questions of class, race, sexual identity,

age, and ethnicity. The world of women will always be linked to the world of men as proof of men's control over women (Beauvoir, 2011:105).

According to Beauvoir (2011:144-145) the inequality of the sexes is reflected in how women's roles and opportunities are constrained by societal structures, which restrict their autonomy, education, and ability to act independently. The passage illustrates how, historically, the few women who were able to break free from these constraints, such as queens, saints, or exceptional figures like Christine de Pizan, only did so under extraordinary circumstances. Women in general, however, are marginalized and their roles are limited to that of the wife or spinster, with little possibility for individual agency or social standing. The contrast between the "unmarried woman" and the wife highlights the stark disparity in legal and social independence. Even though unmarried women theoretically have legal autonomy, in practice, they lack the economic power and social dignity needed to fully exercise this freedom. Their freedom is described as negative—defined more by disobedience or vice than by genuine autonomy or empowerment. Conversely, women of the working class face economic oppression that negates both their sexual and individual freedoms.

Feminist criticism is concerned with questioning the role of women and women's writing in the existing system of values. Feminist criticism defines as a male-dominated society, male-supreme, and androcentric social system. In such societies, men are the absolute dominators in every social aspect. Despite the rise of feminism and the significant successes achieved in challenging male domination, the root of male dominated remains entrenched. Women continue to suffer in these male-dominated societies, facing subordination and perceived inferiority. Moreover, male dominated is perpetuated by both men and women, with men as the rulers and women as the ruled. Overall, the idea of male dominated society continues to prevail, maintaining a structure where male authority is central and persistent (Guo, 2018:453-454). Feminist criticism, which interrogates the role of women and women's writing within a male-dominated, androcentric society where men dominate every social aspect, aligns closely with the themes explored in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Margaret Atwood's works, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale*, provide a profound exploration of the inequality of the sexes and its impact on women's lives. Margaret Atwood is a Canadian writer of novels, poetry, essays, short fiction, children's books and even radio dramas. She is one of the world's most popular authors. Her published work is diverse and deep, but she is best known for *The Handmaid's Tale*, a feminist speculative fiction classic. The novel was first published in 1985 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It quickly became a global bestseller, selling over 8 million copies in its lifespan. The book has lately regained public attention, returning to bestseller charts in both the United Kingdom and the United States, becoming a rallying symbol for demonstrators at women's marches following Donald Trump's election, and generating an Emmy Award-winning television series. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is based on the written account of a woman who lives in sexual slavery in a future repressive Christian theocracy that has seized power after ecological upheaval. Additionally, the novel was transformed into a TV series. It is the first TV show produced by Hulu to win a major award and the first series on a streaming service to win an Emmy for Outstanding Series. It also won the Golden Globe Award for Best Television Series – Drama.

In Margaret Atwood's "*The Handmaid's Tale*," the narrative delves into various aspects of feminism, examining the enduring inequality between the sexes and the ongoing struggle of women. The novel focuses on the lower class of women, particularly the Handmaids, who are stripped of their rights and treated with little respect. They face severe oppression from elite men and lose their freedom of movement. Due to widespread pollution and chemical poisoning, many women become infertile, prompting the government to mandate that unmarried or fertile women serve as vessels for reproduction. Offred, a Handmaid and mother, is forced to abandon her family for this role, losing all personal freedom and becoming a modern sexual slave to the powerful men of Gilead. The resistance of Offred and her friends against the harsh conditions of the Red Center highlights the oppressive measures employed by the Aunts to enforce obedience among the women in training (Atwood, 1985).

According to Beauvoir (2011:403) the struggle highlighted is the social pressure and potential consequences that women may face when seeking the same sexual freedom and pleasure as men. This concept speaks to a broader issue: the systematic objectification and subjugation of women in comparison to the dominant gender, men. Within this cultural framework, women often find their potential for self-realization and authentic existence limited. This limitation extends beyond individual experiences to encompass societal perspectives on the obligations frequently assigned to women and the multitude of struggles they encounter. These challenges highlight broader societal imbalances caused by male-dominated systems and entrenched social structures that maintain inequality between the sexes. Feminism evolved in reaction to these obstacles, with the goal of dismantling such structures and advocating for equality between men and women on a larger scale.

This emphasizes the consequences of depriving women of their rights and autonomy, limiting their position, and subjecting them to degrading treatment. It is a thought-provoking exploration of the importance of individual rights and freedoms in society. The society shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* is characterized by extreme authority over women's bodies, reproductive rights, and personal liberties.

It shows the potential hazards of uncontrolled power and the implications of turning women into mere reproductive vessels. The novel discusses how the state manipulates and controls sexuality, reducing it to a simple procreative purpose. This shows the dehumanizing implications of removing the pleasure and emotional parts of personal relationships.

Some previous studies inspired this study. The first was by Khusna and Zainullah, published in 2022, entitled *Kinds of Social Protests in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. The result of this research is that there are four types of social protest in Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*: symbolic social protest, anticorporation social protest, intervention social protest, and alternative institutional social protest. The second was by Mufti, published in 2023, titled *Bodies of Silence and Space: Victimhood, Complicity, and Resistance in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. This study examined the complexity of resistance and power conditions for women in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. The third was by Pandelaki, published in 2021, entitled *The Oppression of Women in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale*. The study aims to explain women's oppression by a patriarchal regime in a literary work entitled *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

The fourth was by Mahsa and Thoyibi, published in 2019, entitled *Struggle for Gender Equality Against the Fundamental Regime in The Handmaid's Tale Novel (1985): A Feminist Perspective*. The study has three results: 1) found six indicators that influenced the struggle for gender equality. 2) in composing her novel, the author conveyed some issues by describing characters, events, place settings, and language styles. 3) the author addresses the 2 topics of gender equality based on his reflection on women's rights and the history of women's rights violations in the United States in the 1980s. The fifth was by Podroužková, Mgr Lucie, and Bc Iveta Smejkalová, published in 2019, entitled *Intertextuality of Women's Roles in The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood*. This thesis addresses the intertextuality of women's roles in Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. The first section focuses on the context of Atwood's work.

This study has five previous studies based on the explanation in the paragraph above. From several previous studies, the writer can find several differences that the writer saw in my research. Previous studies provide valuable information on kinds of social protests, bodies of silence space, the oppression of women, gender equality and intertextuality. While previous research has explored various aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale*, there remains a gap in our understanding of the nuanced depiction of gender inequality in the novel. This study aims to address this gap by focusing specifically on the portrayal of female struggle against gender inequality within Margaret Atwood's work. The novel highlights the pervasive dominance of men and the systemic denial of equal rights to women. By concentrating on the theme of Women's Struggle Against the Inequality of the Sexes as presented in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this research seeks to offer new insights and contribute to a deeper comprehension of the gender dynamics and their implications in the narrative, ultimately advancing the discourse on this critical issue.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the description in the above background of the study, several research questions can be formulates:

1. What is the inequality of the sexes experienced by the female protagonists in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood?
2. What is the struggle of the female protagonist against inequality in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on the statements of the research questions, there are two objectives of this research are follows:

1. To find out inequality of the sexes experienced in novel *The Handmaid's Tale*
2. To find out struggle of the female against inequality in novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

1.4 Significance of the Study

Theoretically, this research will contribute to feminist literary theory by analyzing how the novel illustrates systemic inequality and the consequent struggle of women to gain equal rights. It will explore how Atwood's portrayal aligns with or challenges existing theoretical frameworks on gender inequality, thus offering new insights into the theoretical underpinnings of feminist critique in literature. This study is expected to provide knowledge development in language learning, because novels, a type of literary work, can help students learn languages. Practically, this study expected this study to be useful for other researchers conducting other references. Then, this study is expected to guide how to conduct a study utilizing textual analysis in novel analysis through Beauvoir's.

1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

It is impossible to analyze all parts of the debate simultaneously because it would take too much time and not provide a thorough explanation. It is important to create scope and limitations because it will make this research more objective. Within the scope of this study, the intention is to delve into the analysis and referring to feminist ideas that in a male-dominated society, the way men view women is a form of control, with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Then, because the author uses feminist theory to analyze this issue, the writer limits this study by examining protagonist's utterances and narrator's words related to the portrayal of inequality shown by the sexes in the novel.